DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 701 CS 506 631

AUTHOR Herbeck, Dale A.
TITLE The Benevolent Technocrat: Michael Dukakis' Strategy in the 1988 Presidential Debates.
PUB DATE 5 May 89
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (80th, Ocean City, MD, May 3-7, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Debate; *Debate Format; Mass Media Role; *Persuasive Discourse; *Political Candidates; *Political Issues; *Presidential Campaigns (United States)
IDENTIFIERS Bush (George); *Dukakis (Michael); Political Image; Political Rhetoric; Strategic Issues Management; Strategy Choice

ABSTRACT

Michael Dukakis lost the presidential campaign debates of 1988 (or at least failed to capitalize as much as he might have) because he understood the debates to be genuine debates. Consequently, Dukakis acted as a debater generating an image of himself as a "benevolent technocrat," which was an error. It must be pointed out that the presidential debates and real academic debates are quite different for several reasons. For example, the real controversy in presidential debates is between the candidates and their media questioners, as opposed to being between the two candidates. It was also obvious that Dukakis and his handlers did not appreciate the specialized nature of these debates. An analysis of the questions and answers that Dukakis gave showed that the image he was trying to project, that of a benevolent technocrat, was disastrous. He showed no emotion and feeling, he did not muster outrage at the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife, and he was unable to portray himself as a leader. The failure of Dukakis' strategy is significant for several reasons. It suggests that the 1988 presidential debates were more an exercise in image management than debating, and it illustrates why "traditional" debate between the presidential candidates is extremely unlikely. What this means is that the debates should probably be appreciated for what they are, political events exemplifying democratic traditions open to everyone, rather than examples of the traditional conception of a debate. (Seventeen notes are included.) (MS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED305701

THE BENEVOLENT TECHNOCRAT: MICHAEL DUKAKIS' STRATEGY IN THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Dale Herbeck

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dale A. Herbeck
Boston College

A paper presented to the
Rhetoric and Public Address Division
at the 1989 Eastern Communication Association Convention
in Ocean City, Maryland

5 May 1989

CS506631

THE BENEVOLENT TECHNOCRAT: MICHAEL DUKAKIS' STRATEGY IN THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

> I won the Democratic nomination in 51 separate contests. I think I'm a reasonably likable guy. I'm serious, though I think I'm a little more lovable these days than I used to be back in my youth when I began in my state legislature. But I'm also a serious guy. I think the Presidency of the United States is a very serious office. And I think we have to address these issues in a very serious way.[1]

And that is precisely what Governor Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusets did during the 1988 Presidential Debates. He spoke to the questions, offered detailed analyses, supporting facts and figures, and systematically criticized the Reagan Administration and his opponent, Vice President George Bush. Indeed, Michael Dukakis was the very epitome of a "serious" guy addressing "serious" issues in a "serious" way. In fact, he was so "serious," that he was dubbed the "Ice Man" by one leading news weekly. At the same time, in most media accounts, Michael Dukakis was criticized for his poor showing in the debates. While most commentators believed that he "won" the first debate, it was widely perceived as a hollow victory because he had not given people a reason to vote for him. This problem only magnified itself in his "loss" in the second debate, which served to highlight his image problem.[2]

---

[1] "Transcript of the Second Debate Between Bush and Dukakis," The New York Times, 15 October 1988, p. 10. Hereafter referred to as Second Debate.

[2] I used the words "won" and "lost" to refer to the judgments pronounced by a majority of media accounts, and not in the same sense that I would say that someone "won" or "lost" a more traditional debate.

In this paper, I will attempt to offer an explanation of why Michael Dukakis faired so poorly in the 1988 Presidential Debates. Specifically, it is my contention that Dukakis lost the debates (or at least failed to capitalize as much as he might have), because he understood the debates as if they were genuine debates. Consequently, Dukakis acted as a debater generating an image himself as a "benevolent technocrat." To fully appreciate the extent of this error, it is first necessary to comment briefly on the nature of contemporary presidential debates, to discuss Dukakis' strategy and how it manifested itself in answers to specific questions in the second debate, and finally to consider the implications of the apparent failure of Dukakis' strategy.

The Nature of Presidential Debates

It is hardly novel to claim that presidential debates are not "real" debates. Indeed, most commentators seem to be in agreement with this claim.[3] At face value, there are a number of easy distinctions between presidential debates and traditional academic debates. While traditional debates usually focus on a single resolution, the presidential debate format usually forces candidates to address a host of often unrelated issues in a single debate. At the same time, the time limits imposed on answers to questions

---

[3]See, for example, J. Jeffrey Auer, "The Counterfeit Debates," in The Great Debates: Background, Perspective, Effects, ed. Sidney Kraus (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 142-150; Kathleen H. Jamieson and David S. Birdsell, Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 15; and Lloyd Bitzer and Theodore Reuter, Carter vs. Ford: The Counterfeit Debates of 1976 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980). For the opposite perspective see Diana Prentice Carlin, "A Defense of the 'Debate' in Presidential Debates," forthcoming in Argumentation and Advocacy: The Journal of the American Forensic Association.

during a presidential debate prevent a candidate from developing a detailed position. Further, the presidential debates minimize the argumentative clash between the advocates that is typical in a more academic debate. Finally, it often seems that the real controversy in presidential debates is between the candidates and their media questioners as opposed to being between the two candidates.

If we are realistic, there is no reason to believe that presidential debates will change in the future. The candidates are not compelled to participate in debates. Once they commit to debating, they are able to control the format through complex negotiations. While third parties (such as the League of Women Voters) may appear to control the format, it is ultimately the candidates who set the rules.[4] In the words of Sidney Kraus, "the unsatisfactory form of the debates is due to candidates and their staffs, who ultimately decide on the format and, along with the representatives from television networks and sponsoring organizations, bring about what may be termed a negotiated format."[5] Candidates want to win, and the format selected is designed to maximize the competitive advantage, and not to educate the public or to produce truth.

While it is hardly novel to claim that the presidential debates are not true debates, and that they are unlikely to improve dramatically in the future, it is equally unremarkable to claim that the debates have really become complex exercises in image management. If we are candid, most of the the

---

[4]For a more detailed description of this process see Sidney Kraus, Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988), pp. 33-63.

[5]Krauss, p. 33.

presidential debates can be reduced to one or two lingering images. The most notable memory of the Kennedy and Nixon debates in 1960, for example, was the difference in appearance between the candidates. The 1976 debates between Ford and Carter are remembered because of Ford's gaffe regarding the Eastern European states. The 1980 debates bring back memories of Jimmy Carter admitting that he consulted with his daughter, Amy, on nuclear policy. The 1984 debates featured Reagan admonishing Mondale for exaggerating.

Like any other political spectacle, debates generate images.[6] The 1988 Presidential Debates offered Vice President George Bush the opportunity to "demonstrate that he is as assured and self-confident as he has seemed to be in carefully controlled campaign situations."[7] For Michael Dukakis, the debates offer the chance to prove that he is "presidential enough in demeanor and substance to be a plausible candidate for the White House."[8] What is significant, for the purposes of this analysis, is how successful the candidates were in building these images. In retrospect, it is easy to see that Bush succeeded and that Dukakis failed. In the section that follows, I will attempt to explain how and why this happened.

---

[6]For a more elaborate discussion of this contention see James E. Combs, Dimensions of Political Drama (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear), Murray Edelman, Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), and Richard Merelman, "The Dramaturgy of Politics," in Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society, eds. James E. Combs and Michael W. Mansfield (New York: Hastings, 1976).

[7]Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, "Debate is a High-Stakes Games," Des Moines Register, 23 September 1988, p. 10A.

[8]Germond and Witcover, p. 10A.

The Benevolent Technocrat: Michael Dukakis' Strategy in the 1988 Presidential Debates

The error of Dukakis and his handlers was that they did not appreciate the specialized nature of presidential debates. This was evident from the very outset, as the candidates began to position themselves for the debate. Bush's campaign intentionally attempted to create low expectations for the Vice President. They noted that Dukakis was an experienced advocate--pointing to his experience as an attorney, legislator, and moderator on the television program "The Advocates." They noted that Dukakis had already participated in nearly forty debates while seeking the Democratic nomination. Moreover, they freely conceded Bush's tendency to misspeak. The clear implication of this posturing was that Bush could win the debates if he was able to avoid making any glaring errors. In contrast, the Dukakis campaign did not attempt to denigrate the Governor's debating skills. Nor did they attempt to raise expectations and hence the standards for judging Bush. Rather, they stressed the importance of the debates as a way to provide information to the public. They offered their sincere conviction that the debates would provide a clear distinction between the candidates on the issues.[9]

This attitude, that the debates were a serious discussion of the issues, was manifested in Dukakis' strategy in the debates. A decision was made to cast Dukakis in the image of the "benevolent technocrat," an efficient, albeit dispassionate, administrator with the skills necessary to make government serve the American people. While some efforts were made to soften the Governor's cold image, the strategy relied heavily on his ability to generate the impression of competence. This required Dukakis to speak to the

---

[9]This discussion of expectations is based on Prentice and "Lectern to Lectern," Newsweek, 21 November 1988, pp. 120-140.

questions, to establish his own expertise, and to offer detailed analysis justifying his positions. At the same time, the strategy attempted to undercut Bush's competence by pointing to his role in the Iran-Contra scandal, his negative campaign tactics, and his selection of Dan Quayle as his Vice-President.[10]

To appreciate the significance of this strategy, a review of the second presidential debate conducted in Los Angeles on 13 October 1988 is instructive. This debate was especially important, as Dukakis was trailing by a minimum of six points in the polls. Even after Bentsen's one-sided debate with Quayle, the margin held relatively constant. More importantly, Bush was starting to develop a commanding majority in the Electoral College. Many analysts believed that Dukakis needed to score a "knockout punch" in this debate to have any chance of winning the election. Moreover, as the second debate between the two Presidential contenders, this exchange subsumed the lessons of the first debate and offered the candidates a final chance to present themselves to the American people.

The best example of the benevolent technocrat strategy can be seen in the very first question asked of Dukakis.[11] Newsweek likened it to "a fat pitch disguised as a beanball," as just about any answer would suffice.[12] Nonetheless, Dukakis responded in a fashion that must be read in its entirety to be fully appreciated:

---

[10]See "Nine Key Moments," Time, 21 November 1988, p. 56.

[11]For simplicity, I have numbered the questions in the order which they were originally directed to Dukakis in the debate. I have not adjusted the order to reflect the intervening questions asked of Bush.

[12]"Lectern to Lectern," p. 139.

> Bernard Shaw: Governor, if Kitty were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?
>
> Dukakis: No, I don't, Bernard, and I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all my life. I don't see any evidence that it's a deterrent and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime. We've done so in my own state and it's one of the reasons why we have had the biggest drop in crime of any industrial state in America, why we have the lowest murder rate of any industrial state in America. But we have work to do in this nation. We have work to do to fight a real war, and not a phony war, against drugs and that's something that I want to lead, something we haven't had over the course of the past many years, even though the Vice President has been at least allegedly in charge of that war. We have much to do to set up that war, to double the number of drug enforcement agents, to fight both here and abroad, to work without our neighbors in this hemisphere. And I want to call a hemispheric summit just as soon after the 20th of January as possible to fight that war. But we also have to deal with drug education prevention here at home, and that's one of the things that I hope I can lead personally as the President of the United States. We've had great success in my own state, and we've reached out to young people and their families and been able to prevent them by beginning drug education and prevention in the early elementary grades. So we can fight this war and we can win this war. And we can do so in a way that marshals our forces, that provides real support for state and local law enforcement officers, who have not been getting that kind of support; do it in a way which will bring down violence in this nation, will help our youngsters to stay away from drugs, will stop this avalanche of drugs that's pouring into the country and will make it possible for our kids and our families to grow up in safe and secure and decent neighborhoods.[13]

From a purely technical standpoint, this was a superb answer. At a minimum, Dukakis has advanced the following claims: (1.) capital punishment does not deter crime; (2.) there are other means to combat crime, especially drug abuse; (3.) the Reagan Administration and Vice President Bush have mismanaged the war against drugs.

---

[13]Second Debate, p. 10.

A similar precision of argument can be seen in each of Dukakis' responses. For simplicity of analysis, these questions can be organized into three categories: economic policy, foreign policy, and personal character. The economic policy questions generally asked how Dukakis would manage government spending. The second question, for example, asked how the Governor would balance the federal budget during his term of office. In response, Dukakis (1.) pledged to "collect billions and billions of dollars in taxes owed that aren't being paid in this country," (2.) promised not to impose new taxes, and (3.) claimed that increased economic growth is possible.[14] All of this, while deflecting the charge that he would "put the I.R.S. on every taxpayer" and arguing that the budget deficit threatens America's future.[15]

The seventh question asked Dukakis to assume that he was President and that his plan to balance the budget by tightening tax collection, investing in economic growth, bringing down interest rates and cutting weapons programs was failing. It then asked him which taxes he would increase. In response, Dukakis twice (1.) rejected the premise of the question, (2.) defended the feasibility of increasing tax collection, and (3.) argued that it was appropriate to support expansion of the Internal Revenue Service in support of this goal. The eighth question was similar, in that it asked which entitlement programs he would cut to balance the budget and the ninth question asked whether he was "demagoguing the Social Security issue."[16]

---

[14]Second Debate, p. 10.

[15]Second Debate, p. 10.

[16]Second Debate, p. 12.

In responding to these questions, Dukakis stressed (1.) that he would not cut entitlements, (2.) that he would look elsewhere for needed spending cuts, and (3.) that Vice President Bush was the true enemy of Social Security.

The foreign policy questions elicited a similarly detailed set of responses from Dukakis. In rebutting Vice President Bush's answer to the fourth question on which military programs he would cut and responding to a question directed to him asking which land-based missile he would support, Dukakis responded with staggering detail. He (1.) rejected "Star Wars," (2.) denounced the plan to base the MX on rail cars, and (3.) summarily dismissed the proposed space plane. At the same time, he (4.) announced support of a strong and effective nuclear deterrent, (5.) pledged support for the Stealth Bomber, (6.) the D-5 missile for submarines, and (7.) the advanced cruise missiles. He (8.) justified all of these choices by establishing the classic tradeoff between guns and butter.

The other three foreign policy questions concerned the specifics of his defense policy. The sixth question to Dukakis concerned his position on the board of a Boston-based group called Jobs with Peace. More specifically, the question asked whether Dukakis shared the Group's commitment to a 25 percent cut in the defense budget and the transfer of that money to the domestic economy. Dukakis responded by (1.) distinguishing his commitment to arms control and reduced military spending from the specific proposal advocated by Jobs with Peace, (2.) by stressing the need for defense cuts, (3.) by claiming that the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty made further arms control possible, and (4.) by stressing the importance of increasing funding to domestic programs. The tenth question asked Dukakis how he would configure United States defense resources. More specifically, it asked about Dukakis' commitment to relatively expensive conventional

forces and his confidence in the air and sea legs of the strategic triad. In response Dukakis promised to support (1.) less expensive conventional options and (2.) modernization of strategic forces. At the same time, he (3.) warned that existing appropriations were inadequate to fund all defense needs. The appropriate response, he concluded, was (4.) to make tough choices and (5.) to renew diplomatic efforts for world peace. The eleventh and final question to Dukakis concerned the safety of plants producing nuclear weapons material. More specifically, the question asked if he would make the safety of these plants and the integrity of the weapons material supply a higher priority. In response, Dukakis (1.) proclaimed his commitment to a safe and secure source of weapons material, (2.) questioned how the present situation could have occurred, (3.) and questioned the Reagan Administration's resolve on the matter.

In answering both the economic and the foreign policy questions, Dukakis was true to his game plan. He responded to each of the questions with a dispassionate logic intended to convince the American people that he would be an effective administrator. This attitude is especially evident in Dukakis' response to the character questions. The two questions in this category, more about the man than his policies, illicited equally mechanical responses. The fifth question asked during the debate invited the Governor to identify his personal heroes. In response, Dukakis groped through a list of public-spirited professions such as Senators and Congressmen, governors, Olympic athletes, doctors, scientists, teachers, clergy, drug counselors, and law enforcement officials. More telling was the fact that his response only elicited one name, Dr. Jonas Salk, and absolutely no stories. When presented with the ideal chance to praise the qualities which he admired, the Governor could only manage to list occupations.

The other character question asked whether Dukakis thought a President has to be likable to be effective. In responding, Dukakis uttered the quotation about being serious and likable which appears at the beginning of this paper. He then digressed to argue that (1.) Vice President Bush will be forced to break his pledges not to raise taxes and (2.) that the next President will have to work with Congress to solve America's problems. At no point did the Governor attempt to describe his personal view of leadership.

While this analysis of each of Dukakis' answers in the Second Presidential Debate may seem tedious, it does reveal that Dukakis utilized a consistent strategy throughout. With the obvious exception of the question concerning heroes, Dukakis always began his answer by concisely stating his position, offering supporting evidence and analysis, and he concluded by explicitly or implicitly attacking the opposition (either the Reagan Administration or Vice-President Bush). Throughout, Dukakis attempted to portray himself as an efficient administrator capable of making the government work for the people.

The results of this strategy were disastrous. While we might praise Dukakis for the sophistication and the forthrightness of his answers, the absence of emotion and feeling was disastrous. He could not muster outrage at the rape and murder of his wife, he was unable to recount a single heroic tale, and he personally described his leadership style as "serious." While he answered the economic and foreign policy questions with detail proving competence, he was unable to portray himself as a leader. Succinctly summarizing the debate, Time announced that "Bush won the debate largely because he triumphed in the congeniality competition."[17]

---

[17] "Bush Scores a Warm Win," Time, 24 October 1988, p. 18.

The Demise of Presidential Debates

While we may attribute Dukakis' failure in the second presidential debate to a misunderstanding of the event, the failure of the "benevolent technocrat" strategy is significant for several reasons. First, it strongly suggests that the presidential debates are more an exercise in image management than debating. By most formal conceptions of debate, Dukakis was a formidable advocate. Debate judges would have given him good marks on technical merit. Yet, he lost the battle for public opinion because the viewing audience is more concerned with image than with substance. The benevolent technocrat appealed to no one. While George Bush hardly distinguished himself as a debater, he did portray himself as a real human capable of emotion. This result, at the very least, reaffirms the thesis that presidential debates are fundamentally different that more traditional debates. Moreover, it strongly suggests that advocates would be better served by focusing on portraying an image than on scoring debate points.

Second, the failure of the benevolent technocrat strategy illustrates why "traditional" debate between the Presidential candidates is extremely unlikely. The lesson of the 1988 Presidential Debates is that image matters a great deal. Pollsters, advisers, and handlers, have surely digested this lesson. Were John Sasso and Susan Estrich given a second change, there can be no doubt but that we would see a very different Michael Dukakis. The edges would be softer, the candidate would be more compassionate, and we would surely see the emotion that was so conspicuously absent in the second debate. Thus, we can only expect that the candidates of the future will also have internalized this lesson. As a result, we can surely expect the 1992 Presidential Debates to be more about images than about arguments.

Taken together, these conclusions may cast aspersions on the value of political debates. Still, this may be a harsh criticism. The fact that presidential debates may not conform to traditional conceptions of debate does not mean that they are inherently invalid. Rather, it suggests that we should probably appreciate them for what they are, political events exemplifying democratic traditions open to everyone. While we may never see the candidates, we can see the debates. Therein lies the value of such events and the standard for judgment. Rather than talking about "winners" and "losers," we should assess the debates as political rituals.